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Luke 9:51–56, New Revised Standard Version, updated edition.

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, ⁵³ but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then they went on to another village."*

The road to palm branches.

In his Gospel, from Chapter 9 to 19, 11 of 24 chapters, Luke tells us of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. This material is unique to Luke's Gospel. He is the one Gospel writer to focus on Jesus' acceptance of his fate, determined by God the Father. He knows he must die, so he begins his long walk to death - from Capernaum to Jerusalem - approximately 106 miles. Capernaum is on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, the general area where Jesus spent much of his life. Jerusalem is south, below the Sea of Galilee, west of the Dead Sea. His path very roughly follows the Jordan River. Luke begins this core of his Gospel, where Jesus offers his life for the salvation of the Gentiles, with a poetic introduction:

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because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ *When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”** ⁵⁵ *But he turned and rebuked them.* ⁵⁶ *Then they went on to another village.”*

By “*taken up*” Luke means Jesus will eventually ascend into Heaven – after suffering and dying. He sends messengers ahead to negotiate with Samaritans. They were a people of mixed ethnicity, part Jew and partly descended from native peoples whom the Assyrians had planted in areas where they had displaced Jews. They had a faith similar to that of the Jews, but because the Assyrians had pitted the Samaritans against the Jews, the two groups hated each other. Apparently, the Samaritans, when they hear that Jesus’ party is headed to Jerusalem, the faith home of the Jews, refuse to let the group through their land. The Apostles offer to perform a miracle and kill the Samaritans, but Jesus, showing his love for all people, especially those who are shunned, rebukes his Apostles for even thinking this. So, they choose a different route for the first part of their journey. This introduction is very important, as it sets the tone for this major stage in the life of Jesus. Soon, he will enter Jerusalem on a donkey, with people laying palm branches before him, calling him their Messiah, and then, quickly, they will turn on him, apparently because he does not turn out to be worldly savior who will conquer the Romans. Jesus knows all of this in advance. He will guide us into and through the Kingdom

of God. He will do it willingly, without offering physical resistance, and with a love for all people. Very importantly, Jesus is on this journey so that he can accomplish his messianic mission, assigned to him by God the Father.

At the beginning of the journey, someone volunteers to follow Jesus wherever he may go. Jesus grimly speaks of himself: *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”* Jesus then sends out 72 to spread word of the Kingdom. I have heavily edited Jesus’ words:

³Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. ⁹Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’

Jesus begins training the Apostles for their mission after he is gone. He says to them: *“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”* After this, Jesus begins preaching as he travels, giving instruction in his famous parables, which play a very significant role in the Gospel of Luke. He begins with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus delivers the Lord’s Prayer to his Apostles. As he continues on his journey, he tells the parables of the Rich Fool who learns a lesson about greed, the Great Banquet where the poor and the outcast are the elite guests, the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the

Lost Son, all of which tell us about God's excitement over a lost soul returning to God, the Shrewd Manager, where we learn to serve the Master who most matters, the Rich Man and Lazarus, where the rich man and the poor Lazarus reverse their power roles in the afterlife, the Persistent Widow, who shows us that God is a far more just judge than earthly judges, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, in which the Pharisee is condemned and the outcast tax collector is accepted by God, and the Rich Ruler, who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells the rich man that it is not easy, as he must follow the commandments of God and sell all that he has and give it to the poor – because it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

Luke focuses heavily on prayer, showing Jesus coming before God and accepting what must happen. Jesus also performs miracles, healing a blind man, and casting a demon out of another man. He heals a woman who has been bent over for eighteen years – and gets in trouble with the religious authorities because it is the Sabbath. We return to the topic of the cost of discipleship with a couple more stories, including that of Mary and Martha, one of whom becomes a dedicated follower of Jesus. As the journey continues, Jesus cleanses ten lepers, one of which is a Samaritan. Near the end, as he is approaching Jerusalem, Jesus teaches his disciples and the Pharisees about the Kingdom of God. He makes it

clear that his trip to Jerusalem, where he is about to declare himself the Messiah, will not make him a worldly king. He tells the Pharisees: *“The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”* To the Apostles he delivers a warning about false prophets who will arise when he leaves the Earth:

“The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. ²³ And they will say to you, ‘Look, there!’ or ‘Look, here!’ Do not go out or follow them. ²⁴ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. ²⁵ But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. ²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.”

Jesus draws a parallel between himself and Noah, who had to see almost all of humanity destroyed. But the Son of Man, Jesus, will be like lightning that fills the entire sky, once he is done with his suffering. He tells his Apostles that this is the sign of a true Prophet – not one of those phonies who will claim to be the Messiah.

Then, not long before entering Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus once again prophesizes his execution, although the Apostles do not understand what he says:

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

The Gentiles whom Jesus refers to are, of course, the Romans, who will carry out his torture and execution. Palm Sunday is the day we celebrate that very humble

ride into the city of the faithful, and indeed, he is about to ride over a road strewn with palm branches. He predicts what we celebrate on Easter - the moment he will arise from the dead. We have finished the trip to Jerusalem. It is all about to unfold – as predicted by the ancient prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.

That walking trip, which included his Apostles, as well as some followers, and most likely at least three named women, is the heart of the Gospel of Luke. It is a long period of anticipation. The Gospel covers the entire life of Jesus from birth, through his childhood, and through the interactions he has with people after he reappears post-resurrection. But half of the Gospel of Luke is dedicated to that final trip Jesus takes. There is a reason for this. It is on this journey, on foot, over a hundred miles in the desert, that Jesus lays out the purpose of his mission on Earth: to bring people, specifically, the Gentiles, non-Jews, into the Kingdom of God. Along the way, he tells us about the Kingdom, how to get there, and the seriousness of committing to following in the footsteps of the Messiah.

Almost exactly a year ago, I spoke several times with someone who was easily young enough to be my son. He had survived a series of major surgeries with numerous complications and at least one close call with death. He had gone through it all with grace and courage. One day, several months into his treatment, when he was still not out of danger, I walked into his room quietly. It was dark, and

I didn't want to wake him up. But he wasn't asleep. He said "Hi, Buzz," and I asked him how he was doing. He said that he was in a lot of pain, and if I had time, it would distract him to talk. I said sure. He started talking about his past. He was raised by a Methodist reverend, he said. I'm serious. He told me all about his father. Let's call the patient Charlie and his father Charlie Sr. It turned out that Charlie Sr. grossly abused his position and preyed upon young women in his congregations. Very young women. Charlie Sr. had a habit of staying in one church only a couple or a few years, significantly less than the norm. He said he just liked to meet new people. To serve new people. He got away with it for many years, but eventually, like a lot of people who use their power to harm others, he began to see what was doing as somehow acceptable. He stopped thinking of himself as someone who could be caught. He got sloppy and was finally arrested. That ended his tenure as a pastor and as a member of the clergy. Charlie Jr. didn't realize that his father had been doing anything wrong until his father was arrested, and by then Charlie Jr. was almost done with high school. The news destroyed his faith in God. He began to see Christianity as fake, as the Bible as fully fictional, and the Church as nothing more than a source of power for corrupt individuals who had kept it alive for centuries just to use it for their own evil purposes. Charlie Jr. said this to me, he said, because I am a Methodist reverend, and he wanted me to know his

position on Christianity and the Church. What's intriguing is that although Charlie was clearly very bitter about all of this - and of course, I do not blame him for feeling that way - he certainly wasn't disrespectful with me. He didn't direct any anger at me. I told him that most reverends and most clergy over the course of the history of the Christian Church were good people who genuinely wanted nothing but the best for those whom they served. I said I was very sorry for what he had gone through, and that his father had harmed him as much as he had harmed anyone else. Then he told me that until he found out about his father, until his mother explained to him why his father wouldn't be coming home, the Easter season had been his favorite time of year. For some reason, he was captivated with that image of the humble king riding a donkey into Jerusalem and people laying palm branches before him. At one of his father's churches, a couple who owned a farm brought a donkey in on Palm Sunday for the kids to ride while wearing a paper crown from Burger King. The Sunday school teachers would put a sticker over the word "Burger" and write "Jesus is" on the sticker.

I certainly wasn't able to restore the beauty of the Easter season for Charlie Jr. But I did read the Palm Sunday story from the Gospel of Luke to him, and we talked about that long walking journey. I told him that Christianity was about Jesus, not his father, not the clergy, not any pastor. I assumed that there was a reason he

had decided to suddenly talk to me about his father. So, I asked him if any part of him still believed. He laughed, even though it made his gut hurt, and said yeah, of course. Then we talked about that magical feeling he had as a child as he envisioned Jesus on his donkey. Then I pointed out that we were a week from Palm Sunday. That meant that Jesus was on that road right now, having left Capernaum, headed south, just west of the Jordan, most likely crossing over the river and to the east side at one point, and then crossing back to the west side of the river, and soon to go past Jericho and Bethany, on his way to Jerusalem. At this Charlie Jr. smiled wistfully. Shortly later, I left his room.

Envision Christ right now, the Messiah, the deliverer of the New Covenant, the person who gave us the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the two great commandments, and about thirty elegant parables. Imagine the God who came to Earth as a human to tell us that he is the way, the truth, and the life. See Jesus on that very long walk, slowly working his way to that donkey ride while he preaches and heals and prays – all so that he could fulfill his destiny as the Messiah. This is an exciting time for us. We live in anticipation right now of something magnificent that changed the world and changed our own destinies. Please pray with me.

God, thank you for placing our Lord on this Earth so that he could walk and teach – and die as the Messiah. Amen.